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## Imaging the Body Politic

The Knot in Pacific Imagination

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# Imaging the Body Politic

## The Knot in Pacific Imagination

Susanne Küchler

IN A RECENT paper on « Traditional Cartography in Papua New Guinea », Eric Silverman (1998) examined artefactual representation of space which served as maps or protomaps in Melanesia. Notable in his account are the Iatmul of the Sepik River who understand space in terms of ancestral migrations encoded in paths of names. Among the eastern Iatmul, paths of names are represented by short-pegs inserted in the stem of a palm frond. Further upriver, among the central and western Iatmul, spatial paths of names are expressed by knots in *kirugu* cords (*ibid.* : 429).

Knotted (sennit) cordage can also be found outside Papua New Guinea, in island Melanesia and Polynesia, to serve as means of recording paths that link discrete places in a definite order in mythic and historical time. Cordage is given prevalence alongside canoes<sup>1</sup> and stones and ceremonial exchange gifts that diagram the social relations or networks between groups (Carrier & Carrier 1990 : 354-375). Yet cords appear to be more than signs for space and location in that their mnemonic and cognitive function partakes of the emotional domain of binding in the creation of uniquely patterned images.

A artefacts whose patterned imagery deploys the cord as texturing device may not in fact be knotted at all like the famous *malanggan* carvings of New Ireland<sup>2</sup>. Made as likeness to cords, *malanggan* carvings are also made as « skins », a widespread Melanesian metaphor for the embodiment of kin relations, suggesting an intriguing connection between knotted images and images of social relations whose visual a riculture across the Pacific I intend to trace in this paper.

1. Joel Bonnemaïson (1994) notes that the Tannese also image space as outrigger canoes, as they also appear as signs for space and location on Gawa and elsewhere in the Pacific. See N. Munn 1983 : 277-308 ; and F. Damon 1990 : 172-176 and 204-209.

2. This point was made in S. Küchler 1999.

## The Knot as Mode of Being, Thinking and Binding

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Knots may appear to many the domain of an anthropology that belongs to another age, when sketches were a quintessential part of field-notes and the recovery of material testimony was foregrounded in the salvaging of cultures. Mundane, functional and yet perplexingly complex, the ethnography of the knot has been for long forgotten by an anthropology for which the artefactual was little more than the remains of symbolic thought.

Knots are indeed found across almost any domain of life in need of binding. While the humanities have little to offer in understanding the knot, its study has been subsumed under the field of topology and as such is central to mathematics (Adams 1994). The study of topology in mathematics achieved prominence with the recognition of the importance of « organic » – that is non-mechanical – space-time in understanding apparently « chaotic » – that is not rule governed – phenomena which surround us. Knots, from the perspective of science, capture the capacity of phenomena for self-organisation, from cells to the weather, and are thus seen to appear in manifold interconnected and generative forms (see Ho 1998).

The anthropological investigation of the knot has been hindered, rather than helped, by its seeming ubiquitous presence as mode of binding. An anthropology of the knot became possible only recently with the publications of MacKenzie's study of netbags in Papua New Guinea (1991) which looked at the knot through the lens of the loop, a variant technique of binding which produces the unseverable, expandable open meshwork characteristic for netbags. Implicit in her study of looped netbags is a tale of contrasting knowledge technologies, one amplifying a continuous line, the other a planar surface, that effectively separate Non-Austronesian-speaking cultures of mainland New Guinea from the Austronesian speaking cultures of island Melanesia and Polynesia (cf. Hauser-Schäublin 1996). Other studies of the knot, such as Ascher's work on the *quipu* (1981, 1991), a system of knotted cords used by the Incas to store information, or Zaslavsky's work on numeration systems in Nigeria and Kenya (1973) position the investigation of the knot within the field of ethnomathematics; while others have examined the knot as a mapping device, relating its mnemonic function to its spatial configuration (Silverman 1998).

We can take from their work an insight into the revelatory capacity of bound form, for its capacity to emulate both being and thinking, and use this insight to look again at artifacts that have never been brought in relation with each other<sup>3</sup>. Tightly bound, planar surfaces of knotted artefacts are commonly found in early 19th century collections of island Melanesia and Polynesia. Famous examples of these are the Hawaiian sacred cord (Valeri 1985: 296), the figural images of Tahitian *to'o* made from tightly bound sennit cord (Babadzan 1993), Tongan bark-cloth patterned by rubbing *tapa* over knotted fish-nets, the sand drawings and dances of Malekula, whose patterns are composed of knots (Layard 1936), the clubs from the Marquesas, « soul-catchers » from the Cook islands, and the Kiribati armour, to name just a few.

3. For a further discussion of the relation between binding, being and thinking, see Küchler 1999, 2001.

Common to all these various forms in which the knot appears in Oceania is an acknowledgement of its double edged nature : as the technical means of « binding », the knot is also the artefact of wrapping. Knotted effigies effect both the sacrificial « death » of the gods, holding their powers at bay while simultaneously securing the continuing protection offered by them to the living (Gell 1998 : 111-113). Yet while wrapping has received the attention it deserves, « binding » and its technical and conceptual foundation in the knot has been given comparatively scant attention, the exception being Valeri's detailed account of its place in Hawaiian kingship (1985) which I will draw on in this paper.

The knot is ascribed more than functional value in the Pacific as it becomes the object of meditative thought and holds together through binding not two *things* but two *concepts*: that of the visible, and that of the invisible whose momentary entanglement facilitates temporal concepts of genealogy and remembrance. The conceptual and visual elaboration of knots in Austronesian effigies expresses the fiction of a conjunction of two bodies, one individual, natural and mortal, the other representing a supra-natural and immortal entity or principle.

Knotted effigies, such as the Hawaiian sacred cord or the Tahitian *to'o* thus fashion a « body politic », a term used by Kantorowicz (1957) to designate the fiction of immortality that surrounded the body of a king in Renaissance France. This fiction has decisively shaped modern institutions and the way contemporary Europeans understand and interpret society, politics and religion. Yet while in Renaissance France the use of effigies was to help express and emphasize the fictional perpetuity of the royal office, despite the death of its individual holders, in the Pacific effigies give rise to a polity of ranked images which is mirrored in the hierarchical structure of the natural body of man<sup>4</sup>.

In order to illustrate the logical force of difference and conjunction, of rank and textured bond, fashioned by the figural knot in the Pacific, I will draw on three ethnographic examples from island Melanesia and Polynesia : the first example is that of the Hawaiian sacred cord central to the sacrifice of the Hawaiian king as described by Valeri (1985 : 295-300), the second that of the Tahitian *to'o* described by Babadzan (1993) (Fig. 1), and the third that of the New Ireland *malanggan* (Fig. 2). The examples have the virtue of documenting the visually and conceptually distinct articulation of binding in the creation of effigies in three adjacent, yet, in terms of political organisation, distinct, cultural areas : as tightly bound sennit, in the case of the Hawaiian sacred cord whose binding brings forth the investiture of the king and the continuing embodiment of his divine powers, as tightly bound and yet sculpted Tahitian *to'o*, associated with a system of ranked chiefly lineages, and as « knot-spanning surface », in the case of the carved and woven *malanggan*, associated with a system of acquired

4. The distinction between the « body mystical » and the « body natural » is a genuine European distinction, though Burkhard Schnepel (1995) has recently traced its impact on accounts of royal ritual in Southern Sudan and East India. His fascinating comparison in the conception and use of effigies in the European, African and East Indian data points to their decisive role in the shaping of the body politic.

rank. The comparison of the differential articulation of the body politic in binding is hoped to shed light on how ritually sanctioned order is conceptualised from within the mundane and material matters of knots in these three cases<sup>5</sup>.

Yet what actually is a knot, let alone an artefact made as knot spanning surface? Before further examining the significance of the knot in Oceania, I will attempt to sketch an answer to this question in the hope to clarify the status of the knot as a carrier of the cognitive force of religious symbolism.

## On Knots and Knot-Spanning Surfaces

There are two insights developed in knot-theory that warrant to be mentioned here as it will help us in examining the ethnographic case studies below. The first fact worth mentioning is that, while there is a large number of distinct knots, such as the so-called un-knot, the trefoil knot or the figure-eight-knot, each one can undergo deformations known in knot-theory as *projections*. The second fact lies in the observation that, essential for understanding and distinguishing knots, is the *surface* or the space around the knot, that which is everything but the knot, with the knot lying within or beneath the surfaces which make it visible to the eye.

Mathematically speaking, therefore, all the surfaces that we look at live in the complement of the knot. This just means that the knot usually appears to us as a planar surface which, when aligned in a series, constitutes a visually impenetrable plane. This projectable and surface-creating nature of the knot distinguishes it most clearly from the looped string for which it is most frequently mistaken (cf. MacKenzie 1991 ; Hauser-Schäublin 1996). Looping is a technique most artfully exemplified in the open meshwork of the Papuan netbag. Here it is the line that is emphasized in the technique of looping which avoids self-intersecting string to create an expandable container. While there are projections or surfaces of knots seen as transformations of a specific type of knot, loops are serially repeated rather than resulting from acts of transformation.

Moreover, as the knot is contained within the negative space created by surfaces, it lends itself to be applied to the conceptualisation of sculptural form. Within the Pacific, the tightly knotted cordage of the Tahitian *to'o* and the richly incised curvilinear planes of *malanggan*-carvings represent two logical applications of knotting in the creation of the figural. But we shall see that, whereas the *to'o* (Fig. 1) visually celebrates the impenetrability of the plane, the *malanggan* (Fig. 2) renders the contained negative space of the knot visible in the hollows of its surface.

5. A topic such as the « body politic » cannot of course be discussed without reference to the literature on personhood and its articulation in Melanesia and Polynesia (e.g. Mosko 1993 ; Strathern 1988 ; Sahlin 1983). Discussions of Strathern's notion of the Melanesian « dividual » « fractal » person versus Sahlin's theory of the Polynesian « expansive person » have retained an abstract tenor which this paper aims to counterbalance by arguing that the very processes of decomposition which allow relations composing a person to become apparent are visually and conceptually made manifest in knotted artifacts. The relevance of the knot for an understanding of social relations in both Polynesia and island Melanesia gives credence, moreover, to Mosko's argument on the complementarity of Polynesian and Melanesian models of personhood and hierarchy.



Fig. 1 To'o God Image of Wood with Sennit.  
Found in the Society Islands, Tahiti, 1881  
(British Museum Q81.OC.1550)

Fig. 2 Brent Collins, One Sided Surface with Opposed  
Cheiralities (oiled cedar, 30 x 12 x 4 in.), 1984  
(Ph. G. Francis)



Fig. 3 *Malanggan*

While the relation between plaited surfaces and knotting appears self-evident to us, the carving of knots into wood may not strike us as feasible. The American artist Brent Collins, however, has demonstrated that the conceptual affinity of a knot-spanning surface with sculptural form can indeed be realized in wood. He created a series of sculptures that amplify the rather unusual explicit application of knot theory to wood (Fig. 3). Wood is a rigid substance, so much so that it is difficult to imagine a surface carved from wood as having the quality of stretchable rubber. Yet many of his pieces display invariant symmetrical relations and uniform thickness from which one can abstract closed, knotted and linked ribbons curving through space (Francis 1993 : 59). The mathematical surface depicted by his artworks indeed constitutes a knot-spanning surface or a « framed link », with the knot literally being carved out of the wood and making up the hollow, negative space of the sculpture. In a book on mathematical art, Francis analyses Collins's sculpture as « spanning an "unlinked link", which looks like a figure-8, and Listing's knot, which is also called figure-8 knot after the shape of the isotopic deformation of it » (*ibid.* : 61). Variations in sculptural form are carried out by Collins in tracing the six possible different surfaces spanning the Listing's knot.

What may have been in Collins's case a rather abstract application of topology to a given material artefact is based, in Celtic knotwork, on the practice of pleating. Knot illuminations such as the King Salomon's knot still popular in medieval times were thought of as vehicles of wisdom, as a resource of knowledge restricted to scribes who held proprietary claims in visualising plaits. Celtic knot design was based on three overlapping grids which defined the path of the knot as a series of geometrically arranged dots. The way in which the square, the primary grid, and its centre, the secondary grid, provide the co-ordinates for the division of the sides of the square, the tertiary grid, may, according to Meehan (1991 : 16), have been seen by early monks as a symbol of tri-unity, three in one : « To the monks of early Christianity, the geometry of the square symbolised the creation of the manifold universe, and it was important to them to contemplate how the Two – the infinite and the finite, indeed all opposites – could be engendered by the One » (*ibid.* : 17). The unity of the grids is effected through the woven line, as all grid-points ultimately are to disappear into the background of the knot. With this principle in mind, all knot patterns covering the illuminated Gospel books of Celtic Art could be created.

This space thus produced is strictly self-referential in that it does not represent spaces of imaginary or past experience. As virtual space, the knot-spanning surface acts synthetically in bringing together, like the mathematical formula or the architectural plan, experiences from a number of domains ; rather than just articulating already existing knowledge, the knot as artefact is thus capable of creating something « new » – a momentary integration of distinct domains of experience which may be a reason for the symptomatic use of the knot as contractual object.

The knot thus figuratively represented in sculptural form epitomises what Levinson (1991) recently called « knowledge technology » responsible for exter-



nalizing non-spatial, logical problems in a distinctly spatial manner. He distinguishes internalised technique, reproducing what one already knows or has learned to know, from a technology designed to produce knowledge through associative understanding. The translation of a non-spatial conceptual problem into a spatial one involves, therefore, the creation of visual analogy. The analogical force of the figural, however, has been largely ignored. Navigators, hunters, ocean fishers, trackers and traders must operate with complex mental maps, and with various systems of dead reckoning to locate current positions on the map, and reach their destination or prey. Less practical spatial models are cosmologies, mental models of the universe, where spirits, ancestors, moral and spiritual qualities, together with terrestrial and celestial phenomena are conceived of as all having their proper place in some three-dimensional scheme. It is however questionable whether such holistic spatial models are expressed in ritual, myth, art and architecture, or whether the spatial concepts that are given analogical force in figurative form entrap thought (cf. Gell 1996).

We could make the hypothesis that artifacts conceived as knot-spanning surfaces work not just in externalising existing knowledge acquired through experience, but serve to order such knowledge in a way that, like diagrams, maps or charts, it creates new knowledge. Yet how can an object that is figured as a knot be seen *as* knowledge without seeing knowledge *in* it, or, in other words, how can such figures serve as incantation and not as interpretation of knowledge?

The idea that an object can be made not for *interpretation*, but as *incantation*, capable of en-trapping thought, was shown by Alfred Gell (*ibid.*) to be rediscovered by modernism long ago, yet overlooked by anthropology during almost the entire century. In spite of advances in science and art, we carried on believing in a notion of cultural form as inherently representational in the spirit of the 19th century theoreticians of style; following up, one might say, the spirit of the age of exploration when cultural form was found in the « arabesque », « ornamental » or other « spatial » treatments of pictorial or plastic surface. To legitimise a concern with such shallow and childish things, form was believed to await being « opened », « uncovered », or « read » in an interpretative process which revealed true knowledge lying behind its mirror like surface<sup>6</sup>.

While this interpretation of form as representational was rooted in the medieval contestation of religious imagery (Duggan 1989), this theory of cultural form figured strongly in the 18th and 19th century culminating in German Romanticism and in a series of writings on ornamentation and « style » that have cast their shadow to this day (cf. Connelly 1995; Summers 1989). I am thinking of Owen Jones's *Grammar of Ornament* (1856) which provided a manual and anthology of all known motifs, of Godfried Sempers' excursion on cultural form as structural symbolic and subordinate to technique (1856), as well as Alois Riegl's *Problems of Style* (1887). These writings laid the foundation for an emerging

6. For a discussion of the problematic inherent in the Platonic image, see B. Stafford 1991. The interpretative work that was allegedly demanded by artifacts displaying ornamental or arabesque characteristics legitimated their collection as « specimen ».

primitivism and provided the departure for art historical and ethnographic thinking on cultural form, from Heinrich Wölfflin's (1941) excursion on style as expression of cultural « Spirit » to Edmund Leach's (1954) influential analysis of Trobriand shields as being « like all primitive art fundamentally representational » in nature.

We find it so hard to abandon this theory of the referentiality of form because of its embeddedness in a web of cultural assumptions of which the most crucial and perhaps least questioned pertains to the nature of spatial conception. There are, as Jürg Wassman (1994) recently reminded us, many reasons to think that spatial conceptualisation is central to human cognition. Spatial understanding is perhaps the first major intellectual task facing a child, but, above all, spatial thinking informs our conceptualisation of many other domains, such as time, social structure, music, mathematics, and emotions (Levinson 1991 : 8). Spatial conceptualisation is of interest when examining cultural relativity, as it appears constraint by the nature of the phenomenal world as well as by human physiology with its visual system and upright posture (Wassmann 1994 : 646). Post-Newtonian theory of space right through to contemporary cognitive science has taken these environmental and cognitive constraints as evidence of the natural and universal conception of space from a « relative, egocentric and anthropomorphic » point of view (*ibid.*).

The universality of this conception of space as proceeding from the human body was recently questioned by Wassmann in his study of the Yupno of Papua New Guinea (1994) who, as he argues, use three different reference systems at the same time. Yupno conceptualisation of space as decentered in everyday life appears plausible to us only recently from a post-Newtonian perspective facilitated by the technology of computer-modeling and virtual reality. Overcome by the rapid succession of new technologies, the implication these technologies might have for an understanding of cognition and cultural form is only beginning to dawn on science.

Computer-modeling, aided by mathematics, is able to visualise spatial conception as decentered since it allows us to transform the same object from a reference system in two-, to one in three- and four-dimensional space. The spatial properties of an object are no longer confined to the perceptual and relative relationship to the human body, but have become the material remains of mental arithmetic. This decentering of spatial conception, in fact, was facilitated by « knot-theory » which provided the mathematical tool for tracing the behavior of solids in shifting reference systems.

The capacity of the knot to fashion de-centered spatial cognition, an incantation of knowledge rather than an interpretation, is of paramount importance for understanding how knotted effigies can visually and conceptually effect a « body politic » that seems at once phenomenal and yet also mystical in nature. The images that appear in and around the space of the knot are a mirror of society, while constituting simultaneously a system of reference for spatial cognition that is independent of particular points of view. Alternatingly formed and dissolved in processes

of tying and untying, knotted effigies call for the spatio-temporal conception of a body politic which mediates the contradictory nature of gods whose powers need to be arrested while being kept at a safe distance.

As will become apparent in the Oceanic examples discussed below, ancestral power appears in continuous motion – being conceived as a flow that is activated through its periodic arrest and release from the space where the knot resides. Yet binding is not just setting into motion the concepts that condition the body politic, it is also effecting a visualisation of these processes as a series of stoppages. While all are taking the form of a knot, such stoppages are visualised in manifold ways. Ranked polities of images emerge from within the space of the knot – images that ground the articulation of social rank not in ritual context or discourse, but in the mundane matters of binding.

## Binding and Body Politic in the Pacific

Our understanding of the body politic would not be the same without Kantorowicz's study of *The Kings Two Bodies* (1957), in which he describes the importance given to the king's figure in the funerary rites of 14th- and 15th-century England and France which matched or even eclipsed the dead body itself. The display of the figure was connected with the new political ideas of that age, indicating that the royal dignity never died, but continued to live in the image of the dead king's jurisdiction until the day his office was transferred. It was the death of the figure that underscored the separation of the mortal body of man from the mystical body of eternal kingship. We do not know much about these figures, what they looked like or how it was possible to imagine or visualize their death. Pacific studies of kingship and sacrifice, however, give us an insight into the humanizing of figures that effect the vision of a divine body from within their own remains. Of these, it is surely the now classical study of Hawaiian kingship and sacrifice by Valerio Valeri which offers us the poignant reference to the knot (1985 : 296-300)<sup>7</sup>.

In Hawaii, a sacred cord (*'aha*) acted as reference point to genealogy – representing not just the king's relationship with the gods, but also the connecting force of genealogy that « binds together all other genealogies, since it is their reference point and the locus of their legitimacy and truth » (*ibid.* : 296). The cord of Hawaiian kingship was not inherited – the undoing of the King's sacred cord dissolved the social bond embodied by the king. The strands obtained from the undoing of the cords were woven into caskets in which the bones of the king were enshrined (*ibid.* : 298).

During the king's reign, the weaving of the cord which celebrated his installation was re-enacted repeatedly as the central organizing rite of the sacrifice of the king. The metaphoric or real « twisting » of the strands that make up the *'aha* cord was enclosed and thereby removed from sight in the space where the knot

7. I will follow Valeri in abstaining from the temptation to provide a symbolic interpretation of the cord.

resides, containing and thus arresting the divine powers which come to form the mystical body of kingship.

The Hawaiian sacred cord effected a contiguous relation with divinity, in that it did not represent through resemblance, but through an associative or contiguous link. As undifferentiated as are the knots that make up the cord, so kingship in Hawaii appeared to possess a unifying force. In Valeri's words (1985 : 296-297) « the king's "cord" (*'aha*) is in fact also the "association" or "congregation" (*'aha*) of nobles. The cord becomes the community ; the link that connects the king with the social bond itself ». In braiding his sacred cords, the king braids social relationships, or, as Valeri puts it, « binds men with his cords » (*ibid.* : 298). The king's title reflects the idea that he is the « binder », since « *haku* », « ruler », also means « to weave », « to put in order », « to compose a chant ».

Valeri extends the political function ascribed to weaving or binding to the poetic function of chants which are collectively composed by those whom the king tied to himself, and therefore become a bond that, bound in the memory of all, binds them all (*ibid.* : 299). The « weaving » of the chants, like the weaving of the cords, is thus « also an intellectual weaving, since social relations are reconstituted by the reproduction of the ideas that are their correlate and justification » (*ibid.*). Since it can be used to tie and untie, according to Valeri, the cord evokes social bond, memory, but also transformation, as is made evident in string games which are used « to represent mythical transformations or even to produce ritual ones » (*ibid.*). The unvarying element of two opposing states (tied and untied) contained in the cord permits the representation of the passage from one to the other – from the inaccessibility of divine nature to its state in myth and ritual, or from sickness to healing in medical rites.

The Hawaiian sacred cord is given *processual value* in being assigned a temporal and performative role responsible for linking the invisible and the visible. It is not what the cord looks like that is important and nor is its possession the target of competing ownership rights as is the case in the following two examples of knotted artefacts. It is the processes of binding and opening to which the cord is subjected which constitutes the mystical, corporate body of kingship (this may be one reason for the astonishing lack of cords in museum collections). This effectivity of the binding of the cord as the core of Hawaiian body politic resonates across the Pacific, yet is not articulated everywhere in the same manner. Thus, while much of what has been said about the Hawaiian cord can also be said about my second example, the Tahitian *to'o*, in this case the bound representation of the link with the gods fashions a polity of ranked images which form the conceptual foundation of society. Furthermore, the *to'o* does not amplify the processuality of binding, but rather underscores the prestige derived from its ownership.

Alain Babadzan's (1993) describes the *to'o* as a composite object, in general made of a piece of hard wood, in elongated shape like a stick or club, of about several centimeters in length to 1,80 meter for the most important piece. This stick remains completely invisible, because the wood is covered in a tight binding of sennit cordage called *'aha*, like the Hawaiian sacred cord. The binding is made of plaits of

cords from the fibers of the coconut tree and/or different layers of wrapped up *tapa*, the whole comprising feathers of different colours, but mainly red feathers, that are placed either outside the *to'o*, or between the wooden frame of the object and its different layers of wrapping. The mummy-like object is decorated on the outside with roughly delineated facial features and limbs made out of sennit cordage.

While the *to'o* we re thought of as a specific representation of the god 'Oro, they did not all represent the same deity, nor exclusively the principal gods alone. A great number of images existed, each owned by a family, a blood line, a clan, a district, and even a whole island. The images were ranked according to size. The correlation between the polity of images and social rank was given regular and formal expression in a ritual called *pa'iatua*, which, translated, means the « gathering and undressing of the gods ». This ritual consisted of three stages, mirroring the cycles which compose the agricultural calendar, each stage being defined in relation to the manipulation of the *to'o*: 1. The unwrapping of the *to'o*, effecting the death or departure of the gods; 2. The exchange of feathers as the « sharing » of the remains of the gods; 3. The re-assemblage or « renewal » of the *to'o* in voking the return of the gods and the period of abundance.

A close relation existed between this last stage and the treatment of the corpse at funerary ceremonies which witnessed the presentation of precious fabrics used as a wrapping for the corpse. Babadzan also remarks (*ibid*: 120) on the similarity between the practice of the wrapping of *to'o* and funerary practices outside of Tahiti such as the Cook islands as well as with the Polynesian bundle gods, all consisting of the wrapping of corpses in matting given as funeral presents which then were tied into a parcel with numerous rounds of sennit cord. The rewrapping of the *to'o* was thus also considered responsible for the summoning of the god under a shape evoking that of a deceased covered in his funeral costume, thus « traveling in reverse the whole journey which normally leads men to ancestrality » (*ibid*: 121). Because the renewed *to'o* borrows the shape of a body withered by time and appearing as a corpse, in fact as the « remains of the gods », the renewal of the *to'o* foreshadows the expulsion of the deity and the renewal of the cycle with the subsequent moulting or rotting of the *to'o* and its consequential undressing.

The processuality of tying and untying implicit in the knot while clearly important is, however, secondary to the question of control over the execution of the rite and the placement of the *to'o* in the funerary enclosure. Here, the knotted surface emerges as container whose manipulation allows for the incorporation as well as the expulsion of forces deemed beyond control. Owning a *to'o* as artifact that can be stripped and reclad in its cordage is thus likened to owning access to the remains of the gods and of the dead, while keeping them for the most time at safe distance.

The similarities between the Tahitian *to'o* and the *malanggan* of New Ireland is striking, given that we are dealing with societies on either side of the Polynesian/Melanesian cultural zone. Like the *to'o*, the *malanggan* renders the knot visible in sculptural form, yet in contrast to the *to'o*, the knot as the seat of ancestral power is not fully contained in the *malanggan*, but visible as negative space sur-

rounded by surfaces that literally span across the knot. The ritual work required to contain the knot and thereby secure the continuing link between the visible and the invisible, which is apparent in the *to'o* in the ranking of its images according to size, is heightened in the *malanggan* as the principle governing the ranking of its images according to the volume of negative space. Here it is not the size of the figure alone which determines the prestige assigned to proprietary rights extended to its image, but the degree of incision as well as the position of the image in a ranked polity of images of startling complexity. While also stressing the process of knotting, as in Hawaii, and the prestige derived from the control of the process, as in Tahiti, the rendering visible of this process in the images of *malanggan* aesthetizes the value assigned to ritual work. The ranked polity of *malanggan*-images mirrors social rank in so far as images can be bought, lent or sold within and between clans, blood-lines, and districts, yet it is overtly the visual and conceptual quality of an image that provokes attempts to partake of the image and thus to become part of a fluid and expanding network of relations of labor and loyalty<sup>8</sup>.

The term *malanggan* refers to an array of figural images invested with the divine powers of the god *moroa*. *Malanggan* are carved from wood, woven from fibre or moulded from clay, yet of these, only the carved and painted figures were collected since the 1870s and today form one of the largest western museum holdings of a still contemporary and flourishing tradition.

Visually and conceptually, these carved figures recall a body wrapped in images that draw attention to bodily folds, contours and shape. Incised to the point of breakage, the emerging fretwork takes the forms of instantly recognisable motifs found in abundance in the physical and animate environment of the island culture which produces them. In carved and painted planes, we can identify birds, pigs, fish and seashells which are depicted with an accuracy and attention to detail that they appear almost life-like; the same can be said for the figure set within the fretwork which appears to stare at the beholder with eyes that could hardly be more vivid. Surrealist artists, from well-known personages such as Alberto Giacometti to others such as Serge Brignioni, were attracted to these figures, not because of their life-like character, but because of the apparently ornamental and yet not quite self-evident nature of the shape given to them. Motifs appear enchained, as figures stand inside the mouth of rock-cods, framed by many different kinds of fish that bite into limbs and chins, birds that bite into snakes and snakes into birds, and the skulls of pigs that appear to metamorphose into birds. Inner shapes appear enclosed by outer frames in ways which contest the apparent reality of what is depicted like a vision in a dream.

We are inclined to suggest that these figures look like story boards visualising myth of potential importance to the understanding of this culture. In fact, such stories exist and are quite readily provided to those connoisseurs or tourists seeking to purchase them as memento of their experience. In search for meaning we direct our eyes away from the hollowed spaces clustering between figure and

8. I have elaborated extensively on the relation between the transaction of images and relations of labor and loyalty (Küchler 1993).

frame. Yet, one may wonder about these hollowed spaces and indeed, it is here in what is rendered absent through incising that we find a surprising clue of what may count as a description of what a *malanggan* is: what we are looking at are complex knot-spanning surfaces reminiscent of the string-figures which form a beloved pastime across the Pacific. The finding of a knot in the hollowed spaces of the wood distinguishes ritually effective artifacts from those which are considered « mistakes » – the space framed by the enveloping planes of the carving calls to mind the heap of wood-chips left at the back of the carvers hut, called *rotap*, literally « salty rubbish », likened to the dead, uprooted trees which drift ashore once a year during the rainy season from the direction of ancestral land and to the smell of women in the early stages of pregnancy.

The knot which is visible as negative space reflects upon containment as something that is both desired and yet inherently dangerous. Any contact with the traces of the knot in any of its forms has to be combated with ritual cleansing to avoid the person being « caught » and thus to fall ill with usually fatal consequences. The deadliness of the knot is associated with the « killer vine » (*ru*) which twists itself around trees with such a force that they eventually succumb and fall. Killer vines are found in small patches of primary rain forest that lie close to the source of rivers or springs, tightly twisted around gigantic trees which are known as the dwellings of « skin-snatchers » who kill humans by taking skins and appearing in human disguise as tricksters. Like in Hawaii, illness ascribed to the trickster is cured with a metaphorical cutting of a vine twisted around the patient's body.

The knot as a trap renders it effective as means for the recapturing of the life-force which was set free during ritual work tracing bodily decomposition and the dismantling of social relations associated with the deceased person. Like artefacts made out of tightly bound cordage, *malanggan* effects rather than represents the relationship between the living and the ancestors, because its surface quite literally recalls the space rendered absent within which the knot resides. In contrast to the Hawaiian cord, however, the relation with the world of spirits that is evoked through the encompassment of the knot is conceived in terms of spatio-temporal processes rather than in terms of genealogical connection, because the carving and rotting of *malanggan* coincide with the pulling ashore and release of ancestral power which mark the agricultural calendar of New Ireland.

Knowledge created as witness to a contractual relation has one characteristic feature and this is its association with place; the act of witnessing links people with a place that begins to act as a nodal point even when, or possibly because of, the object and its relational field is rendered invisible soon after the display. The simple fact that contractual relations are inseparable from the act of witnessing and thus have to be reactivated means that the place of reference is not fixed, but movable, creating regional systems of an expansive and distributed kind. In other words, the ability of the artefact which is conceived as knot-spanning surface to decenter spatial description may be seen to be carried over into the description of social relations. As a result, such relations may appear inherently fluid, notwithstanding the ego-centered and relative narratives of anthropological modeling.

The artefact as knot visualises this place-making capacity through its inherent *voluminousness*, which may be found in the negative space around an object or in the void implicit in its form. Knots, as we have seen, exist in this void, since they can be made visible, and thus comprehensible, by activating the surface of the knot taking away the knot itself. All we see are these rubber-like, inherently deformable surfaces within which voids take on shape and become cognizable as place. From a New Ireland perspective, it is in these voids, that is in the space of the knot, that ancestral power is made to reside; the greater the incisions, the greater the power to the figure and to those capable of realizing it. From a Tahitian perspective, the voluminous quality of the knot is visualized also in terms of size – the bigger the artefact, the more powerful were those regarded who bound it –, yet here the surface created by the tightly knotted cordage appears as a continuum, rather than as a body cavity full of holes and joints. Like a wrap, this continuous surface conceals only to reveal place as the source of power, while the folds of the skin-like surface reveal place-making power within its folds.

The knot's differential articulation, as process of binding, as artifact of wrapping or as second skin or surface that protects was shown to bring forth visually politics of images whose specific relational constitutions are mirrored in the ranked and hierarchical conception of social relations. Cords, bound effigies or wooden carvings of the Pacific are not just illustrating a culture style, a way of thinking already in existence, but may be seen as the carriers of specific analogical thought upon which new forms of social relations came to be built. While certainly not conclusive or complete, this paper aims at stimulating the reconsideration of the body politic and allied relations of hierarchy by locating their logical force in the mundane and textured nature of binding.

KEYWORDS/MOTS CLÉS : binding/*lier* – knowledge technology/*technologie cognitive* – Pacific sculpture/*sculpture du Pacifique* – knotting/*nouer*.



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#### RÉSUMÉ/ABSTRACT

Susanne Küchler, *Imaging the Body Politic. The Knot in Pacific Imagination*. — The knot is argued to have more than a functional value in the Pacific as it becomes the object of thought and holds together through binding not two things, but two concepts : that of the visible and that of the invisible. The paper examines the visual elaboration of knots in Austronesian effigies as vehicle of ways of being and thinking, as their binding expressed the fiction of a conjunction of two bodies, one individual, natural and mortal, the other representing a supra-natural and immortal entity or principle. The Hawaiian sacred cord, the Tahitian *to'o* and the carved knots of *malanggan* sculptures of New Ireland are shown to fashion a « body politic », a term given by Kantorowicz (1957) to the abstract maxim of the sempiternity or perpetuity of divine office in 14th century France. This paper examines the topology of knot based on representation as instances of knowledge technology that is capable of translating and merging in a uniquely efficacious manner both abstract and technical and therefore embodied thought.

Susanne Küchler, *Politiques du corps : le nœud dans l'imaginaire océanien*. — Dans les cultures du Pacifique, le nœud est loin de posséder seulement une valeur fonctionnelle. L'acte de nouer ne lie pas seulement deux choses mais aussi deux concepts – le visible et l'invisible. Dans ce texte, nous étudions l'élaboration visuelle des nœuds dans des effigies austronésiennes qui nous apparaissent comme l'illustration de différents modes d'exister et de penser : l'un individuel, naturel et mortel, l'autre surnaturel et immortel. Les cordes sacrées hawaïennes, le *to'o* tahitien et les nœuds sculptés *malanggan* de la Nouvelle-Irlande supposent différentes « politiques du corps ». Cette expression s'applique ici à un ensemble de représentations hiérarchisées, elles-mêmes fondées sur la structure du corps humain. L'acte de nouer et la topologie impliquée par les représentations fondées sur le nœud sont abordées dans la perspective d'une analyse des techniques de la pensée. Ces procédés se révèlent capables d'articuler, par l'invention d'une image qui incarne le concept, l'acte technique et la pensée abstraite.